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WINSOR'S COLUMBUS.*

Mr. Winsor has brought together in this volume, arranged in lucid order and with characteristic thoroughness, all that is really known respecting the career of Columbus. No source of information, near or remote, has been neglected; and the enormous mass of material has been sifted and examined with great critical skill and, in some respects, with a sobriety of judgment which deserves the highest praise.

The subject is introduced by an enumeration of the sources and the gatherers of them. First in importance are the writings of Columbus himself, ninety-nine distinct pieces, of which sixty-four are preserved in their entirety, twenty-four of them being wholly or in part in his own hand. His letters are all in Spanish, of which, as Harrisie dubiously remarks, he was probably a better master than he was of his native tongue.

Columbus took no great pains to preserve any of his papers except the documentary proofs of his titles and privileges, and these are now in the possession of his descendant, the Duke of Veragua, in Madrid.

Much of the obscurity that shrouds the history of the Discovery is accounted for, as Mr. Winsor reminds us, by the transient character of the fame which it brought

* *Christopher Columbus, and How He Received and Imparted the Spirit of Discovery.* By Justin Winsor. 8vo. Boston and New York. 1891.

to Columbus. It was a later generation that fixed his name in the world's regard.

There are references to maps constructed by Columbus, but not one, certainly to be attributed to him, is known.

Mr. Winsor has no great hope of any important addition to our information concerning the Admiral from the discovery of documents, now hidden in public or private collections. With regard to Ferdinand's biography of his father the judgment is: "Harrisse's views cannot be said to have conquered a position; but his own scrutiny and that which he has engendered in others have done good work in keeping the *Historie* constantly subject to critical caution. Dr. Shea still says of it: 'It is based on the same documents of Christopher Columbus which Las Casas used. It is a work of authority.'"

Not one of the many portraits of Columbus has a claim to authenticity.

Mr. Harrisse, whose name constantly recurs in this work, has practically settled the question of the discoverer's birthplace in favor of Genoa.

The chapter entitled, "*Was Columbus in the North?*" clears away a deal of rubbish with a firm hand, and Mr. Winsor's conclusion, introduced by the words of Muñoz, *Ignorance is generally accompanied by vanity and temerity*, is as follows: "Whether Columbus landed in Iceland, or not, and whether the bruit of the Norse expeditions struck his ears elsewhere or not, the fact of his never mentioning them, when he summoned every supposable evidence to induce acceptance of his views, seems to be enough to show at least that to a mind, possessed

as his was of the scheme of finding India by the west, the stories of such northern wandering offered no suggestion applicable to his purpose. It is, moreover, inconceivable that Columbus should have taken a course southwest from the Canaries, if he had been prompted in any way by tidings of land in the northwest."

Mr. Winsor thinks it is practically impossible to identify the island on which Columbus first landed, but he says: "the weight of modern testimony favors Watling's Island, which so far answers to Columbus's description that about one-third of its interior is water, corresponding to his 'large lagoon.' That this island was Guanahani was first suggested by Muñoz, in 1793."

Capt. Becher, of the British Navy, worked out the argument in favor of Watling's Island in 1856, and he has been followed by Oscar Peschel, by R. H. Major, by Gerard Stein, by Lieut. J. B. Murdoch, U. S. Navy, and by Clements R. Markham.

Three hundred pages of the book,—(pp. 178-476)—, are devoted to the story of the agreement with the Spanish sovereigns and the account of the Four Voyages.

It is here that the reader loses confidence in Mr. Winsor's impartiality.

Every incident that can be made to tell to the disadvantage of the Admiral is brought out in strong relief, while the suggestions favorable to his character are dismissed as the work of the "Canonizers," who seem to ride Mr. Winsor like so many nightmares. A few examples are enough to illustrate this uncritical temper. Martin Alonso Pinzon's disloyalty to his commander calls forth no comment, while on the other hand, Mr. Winsor repeats

more than once the charge that mere greed of money moved Columbus to claim the slight reward offered by the sovereigns to the person who first sighted land. The other claimant was a seaman on board the *Pinta*, Martin Alonso Pinzon's vessel, and it was well known that the spirit of that captain had made his crew ripe for insubordination. Columbus believed that he had seen the light on the land, and he insisted on the reward. "To renounce the prize," says Mr. Manrique,* "was not simply to give up to another a trifling sum of money; it was, in fact, to resign a glory justly deserved. . . . It was to leave the door open for any underhand plot that might be contrived on board the *Pinta*, from which vessel the cry of 'Land!' had first been heard, a plot that would have brought with it the diminution of his prestige as a mariner and, above all, as the commander of the expedition. . . . A man in his position was bound at every hazard to take care that the crew of the *Pinta* should see Martin Alonso, their captain and fellow-countryman, in his true light as nothing more than an officer, who had to receive his orders from Columbus (p. 206)."

Prescott is charged with an obdurate purpose to disguise the truth because he speaks of the noble character of Columbus, and appends in a foot-note a reference to the illegitimate son. It is to be inferred that Mr. Winsor thinks it more noble to abandon than to recognize such a son.

It is implied that there was something very bad in

* Granahani. Investigaciones Histórico-Geográficas sobre el Derrotero de Cristóbal Colón por las Bahamas y Costa de Cuba, etc., por Antonio María Manrique. Arrecife (Canarias), 1890.

Columbus because men were not attached to him. Who, excepting Lafayette, showed any attachment to Washington? Columbus, we are told, was guilty of chicanery because he did not take his sailors into his confidence; but what commander does this? The deceits practised during the First Voyage mark, in Mr. Winsor's mind, the beginning of a decadence which ended in hallucination or insanity.

In his summing up Mr. Winsor has the air of a man with a mission to write down Humboldt and Prescott and Irving and Roselly de Lorgues, and all the rest. He is not satisfied to take Columbus as a man, equally compounded of good and evil; he refuses to see anything but the low aims, the selfishness, the immorality and the cruelty of the Discoverer, who has been regarded for four centuries as a demigod; and his peroration has a certain impressiveness:

“Hardly a name in profane history is more august than his. Hardly another character in the world's record has made so little of its opportunities. His discovery was a blunder; his blunder was a new world; the New World is his monument! Its discoverer might have been its father; he proved to be its despoiler. He might have given its young days such a benignity as the world likes to associate with a maker; he left it a legacy of devastation and crime. He might have been an unselfish promoter of geographical science; he proved a rabid seeker for gold and a viceroyalty. He might have won converts to the fold of Christ by the kindness of his spirit; he gained the execrations of the good angels. He might, like Las Casas, have rebuked the fiendishness of his contemporaries; he set them an

example of perverted belief. The triumph of Barcelona led down to the ignominy of Valladolid, with every step in the degradation palpable and resultant."

The rhetoric and the antitheses of this passage have one grave defect; they do not carry conviction. Mr. Winsor's sincerity is beyond question, but he ignores what he cannot be supposed to have overlooked. It is he who insists upon trying Columbus by the standard of a demigod in order to degrade him below that of a man. If Prescott and Irving have gone wrong through sentiment, Mr. Winsor's narrow sympathies and lack of imagination make him no more than a blind guide.

It is a begging of the question to say that the discovery of America was a blunder. Columbus set out to reach the Indies by sailing to the west, and he came upon unknown lands which lay directly in his course. He would have reached the Indies, had there been no America.

It is not quite clear what is meant by the assertion that Columbus might have been the father of the New World, to which he left only a legacy of devastation and crime.

Justice, if it is not a name, requires that Columbus be made to bear the burden of his own sins and shortcomings, without being held responsible for those of his successors, or his biographers. Mr. Winsor will not admit that the spirit of the age affords any palliation for the wrongs which Columbus perpetrated. He has a right to read history in his own way; and other men have the same right. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were a cruel time. The Christians were fierce and bloodthirsty and treacherous in their relations with each

other, and they looked upon the unbelievers, whether Jews, or Mohammedans, or Pagans, as beings not within the pale of humanity. Knowing this as well as other men know it, Mr. Winsor returns again and again to the subject of Columbus's cruelty, and contrasts with it the benevolence of Las Casas, whom he takes for the representative conscience of the period. Las Casas was a good man, who deserved his appellation of the "Apostle to the Indies"; but he also was a man of the sixteenth century, and the Father of African Slavery in America.

If Columbus left a legacy of devastation and crime, what is to be said of Las Casas?

A true account of any life is an impossibility, for a man does not really know himself, and others never see him as he is; but it must be felt that the instinctive traditional veneration of mankind for the high qualities, which produce great deeds has created an image of Columbus, more nearly like the man than Mr. Winsor's unfaithful picture.

The Appendix, on "The Geographical Results," is a masterly review of the voyages from the time of the discovery to the year 1850, with their successive additions to the knowledge of the mainland until, at last, the configuration of the whole continent stood revealed.

Numerous reproductions of maps and portraits add to the interest of the work. There are, however, too many mistakes in the foreign names. Some of these, such as *Jañez* for *Yañez*, *Mogues* for *Moguer*, *Escoveda* for *Escovedo*, are uncorrected errors of the press; but "*Lorette* in the papal territory," for *Loreto*, belongs to the author, and the name of the younger Pinzon's vessel, the *Niña*, is misspelled *Nina* throughout the book.